

Colonel TODHUNTER of Missouri

By RIPLEY D. SAUNDERS

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CHAPTER XI. Tragedy on the Road.

SHORTLY after noon the next day Colonel Todhunter stopped in at the Stricklands on his way home, as was not unusual for him to do. In reply to an apparently careless question, Margaret Strickland, Tom's eldest sister, told him that Tom had gone into town soon after breakfast.

Colonel Todhunter returned into Nineveh at once, after explaining to Margaret Strickland that he had forgotten to execute certain housekeeping missions for Mrs. Todhunter before driving out. But he found no trace of Tom Strickland until he came to a certain barroom frequented mainly by the Yancey and Tucker factions in politics.

"Colonel," said the bartender, in answer to a question, "Tom Strickland was in here, sir, about two hours ago, lookin' for Stam Tucker. Not findin' him, and waitin' here quite awhile in hopes of his turnin' up, he wrote a note yonder at that table and sent it out by one of the town boys to Stam's house. Then he went away, sir."

"Have you any idea where he went?" The bartender hesitated for a moment. Then: "Well, Colonel Todhunter," he said at last, "I believe, from the way he was talkin', that he went to see that girl, Lottie-May Doggett, that the scandal's about now, sir. He was drinkin' pretty heavy, colonel, and he talked pretty threatenin' about Stam Tucker, and it seemed to me that the two things was connected in some way—his trouble with Stam and his trouble with the girl. I'm inclined to think there's a difficulty brewin', colonel!"

Leaving the barroom, Colonel Todhunter drove directly out to old Rafe Doggett's place. Neither the girl nor her grandfather was at home. Returning into Nineveh he encountered Sim Birdsong, who wore an anxious face.

"I've just seen Stam Tucker, sub!" cried Sim. "We aren't a bit too soon in layin' our plans to prevent trouble, Colonel Todhunter. He's just got a note from Tom Strickland tellin' him to come into town tonight if he don't want to have serious trouble at his own home instead, so it's plain that Tom Strickland's on the warpath, sub."

"What's Stam Tucker goin' to do?" "He ain't goin' into town, colonel. He told me that he had an engagement to call on a young lady, so he wouldn't be at home anyway if Tom came there lookin' for him, and, besides, he says he'll do most anything to prevent trouble just at this time. He's as anxious to get away on that fishin' frolic as we are to have him get away, Colonel Todhunter."

"I'm powerful glad to hear it," commented the colonel. "Well, with Stam Tucker not goin' into town and not stayin' at home and Tom Strickland not knowin' where he's to be found, I reckon things are pretty tolerable safe for tonight. But don't you fall to get Stam off on that fishing jaunt before haybreak tomorrow, Sim."

"I won't, sub," promised Sim Birdsong earnestly. "I'll get him if I have to drag him by the scruff o' the neck!"

Arising early the next morning, Colonel Todhunter drew in a deep breath of fresh air, grateful of soul.

"Thank the Lord!" he said to himself. "Stam Tucker's gone with Sim and the other boys, and we've got a few days' breathin' time anyway before there's any further danger."

But even as Colonel Todhunter thus spoke young Stamford Tucker lay dead at home. He had been shot the night before, and Tom Strickland now was held a prisoner in the little Nineveh jail accused of his murder.

A messenger bearing these dreadful tidings arrived as the colonel stood on the front gallery enjoying the freshness of the morning. He came from Tom Strickland himself.

Colonel Todhunter received the news in silence, his gray brows bent until his eyes were but two glints of metallic blue gray beneath, his grim lips set in an inflexible line.



"Tom," he said, "I want to tell you at the start that I'm goin' to accept every word you say as gospel, and I want you to tell me the whole truth. Then while we're waitin' for your father to get here I'll know better what to do in beginnin' arrangements for your defense. You must tell me the God's truth, my boy."

Tom Strickland's plucky eyes, unflinching, though still bloodshot from overnight drinking, held those of the speaker in a level gaze.

"I'll tell you the truth, colonel," he answered. "I won't vary from it by a hair if I know it."

"How did the meetin' between you and Stam Tucker come about, Tom?" asked Colonel Todhunter. "Tell me just when and how you killed him."

"Colonel," replied Tom Strickland, "I have no recollection of killing Stam Tucker last night. I don't even remember meeting him."

"What do you mean by that?" "I mean that I started out to meet Stam, and that it was my intention to kill him if he didn't publicly tell the truth about him and Lottie-May Doggett, but I ain't clear in my mind as to what happened after I left Nick Bledsoe's barroom. I got to drinkin' there, thinkin' while I was waitin' for Stam Tucker to keep an appointment that I made by letter, and I got tired waitin' for Stam to show up, so I started out to go to his house, seein' as how he wouldn't come to the place I had named. This much I remember, and I've got a confused recollection of wanderin' about the edge of town, but the first thing I remember with any distinctness after leavin' Nick Bledsoe's, is findin' myself in the Nineveh hotel barroom drinkin' again. Whatever happened between is gone from my memory. I was drinkin' hard, Colonel Todhunter, and that's all there is to it. I started drinkin' because I had lost—well, I didn't care what happened to me, sir," Tom concluded.

"You were armed, of course, when you went to meet Stam and have it out with him?"

"Yes, sir; I had my pistol on me."

"Well, then—well, then, Tom—when you were arrested this mornin' after Stam Tucker's body was found on the side of the road halfway between his home and the town, what story did your gun tell, boy? If you had had a shootin' scrape durin' that time your weapon would have said so—a man in your condition, with this difficulty settled, wouldn't have released his gun. What fix was yours in, Tom?"

"That was the first thing the deputy sheriff looked at when he placed me under arrest," said Tom Strickland, his eyes dumbly perplexed. "Colonel Todhunter, one chamber of my pistol was empty, I reckon I must surely have met Stam on the road and killed him."

"Tom," said Colonel Todhunter, almost pleadingly, "whatever way Stam Tucker was killed he got one shot at the man that killed him. His own weapon was a-lyin' right at his hand when they found him, and one bullet had been fired from it. In God's name, my boy, if you was that other man you must have some sort of recollection of the shootin' scrape. It's the truth I'm tryin' to get at, Tom; the truth of how Stam Tucker came to his death. If you killed him we've got to know it, because the whole line of defense has got to be based on absolute knowledge of the truth of whether or not it was you that shot and killed Stam Tucker last night. Dig down in your mind, Tom. My God, boy, you've got to remember everything you did every minute of the time you say you was out lookin' for Stam Tucker!"

Tom Strickland drew a deep breath. "It must have been me that killed him," he said. "I was on my way to do it. And who else wanted to kill him? But I can't remember anything about it, Colonel Todhunter. I'd be glad if I could."

Colonel Todhunter sat helpless for a moment. Finally, "Did you go home after the hotel bar was closed?" he asked.

"No, sir. I slept at the hotel last night."

"What time were you arrested?" "About 6 o'clock."

"Yesterday afternoon, when you had been to Nick Bledsoe's barroom for the first time, did you then go out to see

Lottie-May Doggett, as you told Nick you was a-goin' to do?"

"Yes, sir." "Did you see her?" "Yes, sir. I asked her to tell the truth and acknowledge that I had nothing to do with her disgrace. I told her if she didn't I was going to see Stam Tucker and make him do it or else kill him."

"What did she say to that?" "She laughed at me. That girl's a she devil, Colonel Todhunter. She wouldn't even acknowledge to me that she had lied in tellin' Mrs. Todhunter what she did. She just laughed."

"You also hinted to Nick Bledsoe that there was some serious trouble brewin' between you and Stam about Lottie-May, didn't you?" "I believe I did, sir."

"And you told him you were bound for Stam Tucker's when you left his barroom last night?" "I seem to remember saying something of the sort, Colonel Todhunter. I reckon I gave him a pretty good inkling of the whole affair."

"The man you sent to tell me of your arrest says that Stam Tucker's mother and sister says that Stam left his home about the same time, accordin' to Nick Bledsoe's story, that you left Nick's place to go out there."

"It's likely, sir, that he was coming in to meet me in answer to my letter."

"Tom, that would have brought you and Stam Tucker together about halfway between his home and the town."

"Yes, sir." "And Stam's body was found beside the road just about halfway between his home and the town."

"I know it, colonel. The evidence against me is about as complete as it could be, unless somebody saw me kill Stam. I wish they did, if I killed him. It wouldn't look so much like a cold blooded murder in the dark then."

Colonel Todhunter went direct from the jail to the home of Lottie-May Doggett. This time he found the girl there.

She met him with a defiant look in her eyes, but it seemed to Colonel Todhunter that there was something of dread as well, and her manner, despite a certain bravado, suggested a haunting fear.

"If it's your grandfather you want to see, Colonel Todhunter," she said, her voice not quite steady, "he ain't at home right now. He got some work 'elpin' Lute Burroughs with his horses, and it keeps him over there most o' the daytime."

"It ain't your grandfather, Lottie-May," replied Colonel Todhunter; "it's you I come to see. But I wish he was here, because I reckon I've got to have a right plain talk with you, and I'd rather Rafe was present while we're a-havin' it."

The girl shrank back suddenly. "Then maybe you better call again," she quickly suggested, uneasiness and the hope of a way expressed in her face. "It'll keep till some time when he's home sure, Colonel Todhunter."

"No, Lottie-May, it won't. That's why I've come straight out to see you after leavin' Tom Strickland a prisoner in the Nineveh jail. Stam Tucker's been shot and killed, and Tom's accused of murderin' him, Lottie-May."

The girl gave a little cry, whitening to the lips. She stood facing the colonel with horror-stricken eyes.

"Lottie-May," continued Colonel Todhunter, "the time has come when you must tell the truth about Tom Strickland. His life is in danger, not to speak of his belin' disgraced through what you said about him—and your story caused him to be lookin' for trouble with Stam Tucker—and we've got to know the truth as to whether it was him or Stam Tucker that you had the right to accuse before everybody at the party that night."

A sudden light of fiery venom leaped into Lottie-May Doggett's passionate eyes.

"It ain't me that's to blame!" she cried. "Tom Strickland wanted to kill Stam Tucker because he knew that



"The time has come when you must tell the truth about Tom Strickland."

Stam Tucker would marry Miss Mary Todhunter, your daughter, now that she's got to throw him over. It's her that's to blame for the killin', not me!"

Something came into the girl's throat that seemed to choke her. She threw her hands up to her eyes and began sobbing.

"He wa'n't thinkin' about me at all!" she cried brokenly. "And Stam Tucker didn't really care nothin' for me neither. They was both o' 'em thinkin' about Miss Mary Todhunter. I ain't

nothin' but poor white trash in their eyes, to be th'owed like a rag to one side. And Tom Strickland knows I love him with all my heart and all my soul!" Here her voice broke pitifully.

Then, "And he wouldn't ha' known anything about Stam Tucker's makin' love to me if I hadn't told him myself! Yet he don't think nothin' about me—it's only how he can clear his own skirts by loadin' the blame on Stam. And if he killed him he killed him for your daughter Mary's sake, out o' jealousy, and nothin' else in the wide world! Well, I've done said my say, and you all got to take it for the truth whether you're willin' or not. Stam Tucker's dead and gone, but that ain't a-goin' to clear the way for Tom Strickland to marry Miss Mary Todhunter. I've told her soother the truth, and you and Mrs. Todhunter can't let her marry Tom Strickland with the blame for my ruinatin' restin' on his good name."

She threw back her head and laughed at him mockingly.

"You've come here to make me help you to get Tom Strickland out o' danger, ain't you, Colonel Todhunter? You're just like all the rest o' 'em. I'm settled and done for. I'm dirt under you all's feet. But maybe I can help save Tom Strickland if I tell the right sort of a story—that's it, ain't it? Well, I ain't goin' to do it, Colonel Todhunter!"

"Tom Strickland's got just one chance for his life, Lottie-May," said Colonel Todhunter, "and that is, to prove that you accused him of a sin that ought to ha' been laid at Stam Tucker's door instead and that he quarreled with Stam and killed him for refusin' to acknowledge publicly that this was the truth. Even this ain't much of a chance, but if we don't get it Tom Strickland's goin' to the gallows just as certain as the sun rises and sets. If you told what ain't so, Lottie-May, his blood will be on your head."

The girl shrank back and shivered as if she had been struck. Then, again, the hard mocking light leaped into her eyes, and she laughed aloud.

"And if I change my story to please you all," she scoffed, "what does it amount to, Colonel Todhunter? Just two things, and I'll tell you what they are. I help to get Tom Strickland out o' danger for killin' Stam Tucker, and I clear his good name so he can go straight and marry your daughter Mary. That's what I do—if I'm willin' to tell the story you all want me to tell, and so lift my shame off'n Tom Strickland and put it on a dead man instead—put it on Stam Tucker, that was shot and killed by Tom Strickland because both o' 'em loved Miss Mary Todhunter!"

"I'm askin' you to tell the truth, Lottie-May," said Colonel Todhunter; "that's all. I'm askin' you to tell me now what you will surely have to tell under oath in the Nineveh courtroom at Tom Strickland's trial unless you mean to perjure your soul by kissin' the Bible and then swearin' to lie. That's where you are, my girl! If you told the truth in what you said to Mrs. Todhunter about Tom Strickland I ain't got another word to say. But if you didn't, for God's sake tell it now, Lottie-May, and help me and Tom's father to save his life!"

Again the girl's face had whitened as Colonel Todhunter so suddenly acquainted her with the fact that she must needs be a witness for or against Tom Strickland when he was placed on trial for his life. And again, succeeding this, her eyes hardened with the deadly rancor born of her secret thoughts.

"I told Mrs. Todhunter the truth," she replied. "What I told her I'll tell in court, if I got to. I might be willin' to tell—I might be willin' to tell a lie for Tom Strickland's sake if it wa'n't for Miss Mary Todhunter, but I can't do it for her, and I won't! It ain't in my blood to let another woman walk on me to get to the man I love, Colonel Todhunter, and you and all the rest o' 'em might as well know it once and for all! I got the same shame on me now that my mother had, and I'm her daughter, body and soul!"

Colonel Todhunter looked at Lottie-May Doggett long and silently. His face was grave when he spoke.

"That's all I wanted to see you about, Lottie-May," he said finally. "It looks like I been on a fool's errand, but I've done the best I could. Goodby, child, and you better think over what I've been sayin' to you after I'm gone."

Oddly enough, a little sob broke from the girl's throat as the colonel spoke. The next moment, with one hand fluttering nervously at her bosom, she closed the door behind him.

Crossing the country road a few rods from the gate leading into the Doggetts' yard, Colonel Todhunter stopped to speak to Aunt Mirandy Ransom, the old negress whom he had last met in the Nineveh town square and who now stood at the door of her little cabin. After talking with her some brief time he resumed his way into town.

He met the Hon. William J. Strickland at the entrance to the Nineveh jail. The father's face was gray with anxiety. Colonel Todhunter held his hand with a grip of comforting friendliness.

"The boy's in hell's own hole, Bill," he said. "But you and me 'll pull him out of it if we've got to bust the breechin' doin' it, sub!"

(To Be Continued.)

G. W. Barnhill and wife of Missoula, Montana, were in the city today for a few hours, en route from Glenwood to Auburn, Neb., for a visit. Mr. Barnhill was here some years ago in charge of the Kraft clothing store, and has become the owner of a store in the Montana city.

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Local News

From Tuesday's Daily. Miss Mary E. Foster was a passenger this noon on the flyer for Union to visit with her parents for a few hours.

Dan Rice and wife returned this morning from Glenwood, where they had been visiting with relatives for a few days.

Jacob and Cornelius Bengen of near Mynard were in the city today for a few hours looking after some business matters.

P. S. Barnes, justice of the peace for Weeping Water, was in the city yesterday, being called here on business matters.

J. M. Meisinger, from west of the city, was in town today, being called here to look after some trading with the merchants.

Miss Clara Wohlfarth returned this morning from Loretta, Minnesota, where she had been enjoying an outing at the lakes.

George B. Lehnhoff and family of Omaha motored down Sunday and visited with Mrs. F. D. Lehnhoff and daughter, Miss Tillie.

William Mendenhall was a passenger this morning for Pacific Junction to attend to some matters of business for a few hours.

Mayor Fred Gorder of Weeping Water was a passenger this morning on the early Burlington train for Omaha, where he spent the day.

Mrs. Charles Martin and son, Hill, returned last evening from Lincoln, where they had been visiting with relatives for a short time.

Henry Brinkman departed last evening on No. 2 for Peoria, Illinois, where he will visit for a few weeks, and also at Pekin, with relatives.

John Bajcek was a passenger this morning on No. 6 for Pacific Junction and Glenwood, where he will look after his cigar business in those cities.

Mrs. Henry Snyder of Fairfield, Iowa, came over yesterday afternoon for a short visit with her aunt and uncle, Mrs. Dora Moore and George Dldham, in this city.

Mrs. Mary Allison, who has been visiting with relatives at Wichita, Kansas, for a few weeks, has returned to her home in this city, after a most enjoyable visit.

Monte Franks and wife of Opal, S. D., who have been visiting with relatives and friends in Iowa for a few weeks, arrived in this city yesterday and will visit here for a time.

Misses Nettie, Jessie and Della Moore returned this morning on No. 15 from Loretta, Minnesota, where they have been enjoying a short vacation trip at the lakes, and they report a most pleasant time.

Frank Thomas and wife and two little daughters, of Lincoln, who have been here for a few days visiting with relatives, departed this morning for their home. This is Mr. Thomas' first visit to the old home in eight years.

Mrs. J. D. Young and daughter of Lincoln, who have been here for a few days visiting at the home of Mrs. Young's brother, A. B. Smith and family, departed this morning for their home. They were visiting in Missouri and stopped off here Friday to visit their relatives here.

Mrs. H. B. Burgess is in the city for a few days, a guest at the home of Dr. and Mrs. T. P. Livingston. Mrs. Burgess has been residing with her son, Dr. Frank Burgess, at Cedar Rapids, Neb., since the death of her husband, Canon H. B. Burgess, and is making a short visit here with her old friends.

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